



# Narrating the Past to Interpret the Present: A Conversation with Elizabeth J. Perry

## Citation

Perry, Elizabeth J., and Hanchao Lu. 2015. "Narrating the Past to Interpret the Present: A Conversation with Elizabeth J. Perry." *The Chinese Historical Review* 22 (2) (November): 160–173. doi:10.1179/1547402x15z.000000000051.

## Published Version

doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/1547402X15Z.000000000051>

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:30820522>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

## **Narrating the Past to Interpret the Present:**

### **A Conversation with Elizabeth J. Perry<sup>1</sup>**

ELIZABETH J. PERRY

Harvard University, USA

HANCHAO LU

Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

*In this sparkling and candid conversation, Elizabeth Perry reminisces about her early years in Japan, her first trip back to China in the late 1970s, her reconsideration of the Chinese revolution, and interdisciplinary studies and her career as both a political scientist and historian. Perry shares her insights into the cultural resources of the Chinese Communist Party, the resilience of the Chinese regime, comparisons of the Chinese and Russian revolutions, human connections between the city and the countryside, global issues facing higher education, and her leadership and vision as the director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Elizabeth J. Perry, interdisciplinary scholarship, Chinese revolution, cultural positioning, higher education*

Elizabeth J. Perry 裴宜理, Henry Rosovsky Professor of Government at Harvard

University and Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, needs little introduction to the

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Rose-Ann Thomas of Harvard University for her assistance in preparing the interview script.

readers of *Chinese Historical Review* (CHR). One of the most prominent pioneering scholars in Asian Studies, Perry is a comparativist with special expertise in the politics of China. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship. She has published approximately twenty books, including edited volumes, since 1980. That makes for an average of one book every other year for more than three decades. Aside from that, she has published numerous articles, including one that won the Heinz Eulau award from the American Political Science Association. She is on the editorial boards of over a dozen major scholarly journals, including *CHR*, holds honorary professorships at eight Chinese universities, and has served as the president of the Association for Asian Studies, the largest organization of its kind in the world.

A political scientist by training, and having spent most of her career in a department of political science or government, Professor Perry is also an eminent historian. Many of her works, from her first book on rebels and revolutionaries in North China to her most recent book on the cultural resources of the Chinese Communist revolution as seen through the case of Anyuan, are heavily historical. Her book *Shanghai on Strike: the Politics of Chinese Labor*, won the prestigious John King Fairbank prize from the American Historical Association. It is understandable that topnotch history departments, such as that of Chicago and Stanford Universities, have tried to recruit Perry.

When I was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute in 2014, I took advantage of being on the Harvard campus to invite Professor Perry for an interview for the Forum of *Chinese Historical Review*. Professor Perry graciously agreed to the interview. Our

conversation covered a wide range of topics, including Perry's childhood, her first trip back to China, the discipline of history and of political science, the reassessment of the Chinese revolution, rural-urban relations, the resilience of the Chinese regime, and issues related to cultural positioning. Our conversation also included topics related to China's higher education, the Harvard-Yenching Institute, and Chinese academia in both the PRC and Taiwan. Since Perry was born in Shanghai and devoted her career to Chinese studies.

\*\*\*

**Lu:** You were born in Shanghai, where both of your parents were missionaries teaching at St. John's University, and you grew up in Tokyo in the 1950s. This gives you a sort of natural connection with East Asia. But I wonder if there was something more fundamental or philosophical in your early life —such as a sympathy for the poor and disadvantaged, a sense of justice, a dream for an egalitarian society, etc.—in addition to family ties that eventually brought you to the China field and, in particular, to the study of the Chinese revolution?

**Perry:** When I went to graduate school, I studied both Japan and China, and even though my dissertation was entirely on China, I expected to do both China and Japan, and when I went to the University of Arizona, my first teaching job, I taught both China and Japan. It was only after I moved to the University of Washington, which had both big Japan programs and big China programs that I basically had to make a choice. So I chose China, because it seemed more important and intellectually exciting than the Japan field. I was fascinated by the Chinese Revolution for many reasons. One reason was simply that I had heard my parents talk a lot about their China experiences when I was a child. Also, I was in college and graduate school at such a political time—the 1960s and

1970s—when China’s Cultural Revolution seemed so intriguing. As a child in Japan, I had participated in protests in Tokyo against the US-Japan Security Treaty. President Eisenhower had been scheduled to visit Tokyo at that time, but he canceled the trip due to the massive demonstrations. That impressed me with the political power of popular protest.

**Lu:** And you were there.

**Perry:** I was very young, but I skipped school and went and participated in some of those demonstrations, and found them very exciting. My parents were fine with my doing that. I also remember one May Day when my father came home rather shaken. He had been driving in downtown Tokyo when he encountered the May Day labor protest. Protesters had seen this American, and they started smashing the car windows. After he came home with the car badly damaged, he explained to me what May Day was about and what labor protests were about. I was very interested in that. So popular protest was definitely a prominent part of the environment in which I grew up. Later, during my college and graduate school days, maybe my political interests replaced or overshadowed the early religious training that I had received from my missionary parents. But in some ways they were quite compatible in that both my later political views and my early religious instruction were about siding with people who didn’t have much in the way of means and trying to think about something you could do to help them. Those ethical considerations were instilled from a very early period. But there was also the political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the fascination with the Chinese Revolution.

**Lu:** You are political scientist by training and have been teaching in a political science department almost your entire academic career. At the same time you are also a historian. Many of your works are essentially historical studies (e.g., your first book, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*, your award-winning book, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor*, and your latest book, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*). It seems to me that to various degrees all your historical works have contemporary concerns, using history to illuminate contemporary issues. Reading your books often reminds me of a Chinese proverb, 借古喻今 (*jie gu yu jin*, use the past to allude to the present). Could you please comment on that?

**Perry:** All my academic degrees, Bachelor's, Master's, Ph.D., are in political science. At the University of Washington, I taught in the School of International Studies, and held an adjunct appointment in the Political Science Department. At the University of Arizona, at Berkeley, and here at Harvard, I've been in the Political Science or Government departments. Although the dean at Harvard asked me if I would like a joint appointment with the History Department here when I was considering an offer from Stanford's History Department, I declined. I was attracted by offers from History Departments at both Stanford and Chicago, but I never really felt comfortable accepting a history job because my own training was all in political science. I feel that for teaching and training graduate students, I'm more comfortable and effective as a political scientist.

**Lu:** In your research you tended to look at historical roots to explain contemporary issues.

**Perry:** That's right. I love doing archival research and I like to pursue topics that have both a historical side—a richness of historical material—but also that I hope can say something illuminating about contemporary Chinese politics. My goal is always to

explain contemporary events, but with an eye to how they developed historically, trying to trace those links over time.

**Lu:** Well, for a country like China in particular, I think this makes sense.

**Perry:** I think it's probably true of any country—but China perhaps more than most because Chinese political leaders are themselves so conscious of history, and try to justify their policies in those terms. They may misunderstand history; I may misunderstand history, but nonetheless there's a keen awareness that history is important, history matters, and legitimacy for contemporary politics derives from connections to historical precedents, whether real or imagined. Every country does this to some extent—in the United States, politicians often refer back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Founding Fathers. But China self-consciously sees its contemporary self as an outgrowth of a much older and richer earlier history. I think for political scientists, it's important to explore that history and to ask the question of whether the supposed links are real, imagined, or even fabricated.

These days we see the power of “cultural governance” in China, but it's not what I would consider an organic connection to Chinese history. Much of it is calculated and instrumental, although often very effective. The past doesn't necessarily predict the future but it provides very important cultural resources for leaders to use.

**Lu:** Probably also to legitimize some current policies, because not just the leaders, but the general public too is also history-conscious.

**Perry:** Yes, definitely. I think that's the reason why the Chinese leadership is so anxious to establish its historical legitimacy: because in the eyes of ordinary people, that's considered so valuable. In some other countries, that wouldn't necessarily seem so crucial.

**Lu:** There were huge gaps between the professed goals of Mao's revolution and the harsh reality of life under his rule. The Chinese society that many scholars in the West had imagined before visiting China was quite different from the one they saw in the late 1970s, when, for the first time, most China scholars were able to visit the country. Were you in any way disillusioned with the revolution when you first returned to China at the time? If so, how it might have altered your research and outlook on the revolution?

**Perry:** The disillusionment was considerable. When I first visited briefly on a big city mayors' delegation in June 1979, I was quite surprised, even though we saw only the most prosperous parts of China. I was particularly shocked in Shanghai because I had expected it to be livelier and more developed than it was in 1979. I was taken aback by the poverty visible in China's *richest* city. In the early mornings, people were crouched there cleaning their *matong* [马桶toilet stools] out on the street. Everything looked less developed than I had anticipated. But it was only after I went to live there in September of that year, spending the academic year at Nanda [Nanjing University], that I also came to realize how unequal China was.

As foreigners we could travel by *ruanwo* [软卧soft berth] on the train, but ordinary Chinese could not do the same. At the time, there were very few restaurants, but foreigners got to eat in the special sections of the restaurant serving special dishes, along with the *gaoji ganbu* [高级干部high-ranking cadres]. Ordinary people couldn't afford and weren't allowed those privileges. And as I met more and more people who shared their stories of the Cultural Revolution I realized what a difficult time it had been for so many. Living in China fundamentally changed my views, not so much about the ideals of the Chinese Revolution, but the tragic reality of it.



In my first couple years of teaching—the first year at the University of Arizona, and then a year at the University of Washington—I had portrayed the Chinese Revolution and Maoism in very positive terms. After I returned from a year of living in China, I had to completely revamp all my lectures.

**Lu:** You need to reinterpret Chinese revolution, right?

**Perry:** Yes, indeed. And I felt grateful to one of my advisors in graduate school because initially, I had wanted to write my dissertation on the Cultural Revolution, and he said “You shouldn’t do it .... You feel too sympathetic to the Cultural Revolution. But we really don’t know very much about it. And you don’t know how you’re going to feel once you see all the information that will eventually come out about it. So you shouldn’t do that.” He also advised me to change the conclusion of my dissertation, which was later published as *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China*, to be less positive in my assessment of the achievements of the revolution. I followed his advice and later I was grateful that I had. Living in China in 1979-80 really did change my outlook.

**Lu:** A little bit more about your first trip back to China, you said it was a mayor’s delegation. What was your role there?

**Perry:** My role was called “scholar-escort.” The visit was part of the official exchanges between the U.S. and China, organized by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. Each of those delegations had a China scholar who went along to help interpret China. I was young at the time, and I had not been back to China since my birth. I was chosen to accompany this group of American big-city mayors. We visited Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Changzhou, and Hangzhou.

**Lu:** Did you talk to your mother after your visit—especially about your trip to Shanghai?

**Perry:** Before the trip, I told my mother that I wanted to see if I could visit our old house. My mother drew me a detailed map of how to get to our old house. When I first saw the map, I complained “This map is useless.” It had things like “the church is here and this street number is there...” I said, “Those will all be gone. I won’t be able to make use of this at all.” Actually her map was perfect. The cross on the steeple was gone, but I could still see what had once been the church. Everything, from the former church to our former house still had exactly the same street numbers—even though the names of the streets had changed. So I just followed her map and easily located our old home on the former St. John’s University campus.

I took a lot of photographs and when I showed them to my mother she was quite shocked and remarked, “St. John’s looks terrible.” I thought it looked quite nice, but she insisted, “Oh gosh, no...not compared to how beautiful it used to be!” Then my mother visited me in China in the spring of 1980. We went together to these places in Shanghai. She was visibly depressed by how delapidated Shanghai looked. For me, living in China in 1980, Shanghai seemed so much better off than any other place. I went there often from Nanjing, because I found Shanghai more dynamic and fun. But my mother was stunned by how poor and how depressed it was compared with the 1930s and 1940s. She and my father first went there in 1931, and were there off and on until the spring of 1949.

**Lu:** That’s the best time of old Shanghai.

**Perry:** They used to go out to bars and restaurants, and it was all so colorful and cosmopolitan. In 1980, a number of my parents’ former students had discovered I was in China, and so when they knew my mother was coming to visit, they invited her for a meal. They remembered her favorite restaurant in Shanghai, one of the very few which

was still in operation—Xinya [新雅], on Nanjing Road. They organized a lovely dinner, which obviously was difficult for them because at that time nobody had any money to speak of. So this was really kind of them and it was a very nice occasion, except that several of my mother's former students who were Christians had been severely crippled by beatings during the Cultural Revolution. Some of them were in wheelchairs as a result. They weren't that old; they were quite a bit younger than my mother because they had been her high-school students at St. Mary's Hall. But they were in really bad physical shape. On the one hand, it was wonderful of them to do this for my mother, but on the other hand, for my mother it was extremely sad and shocking to see what had happened to her beloved students. It was a very bittersweet occasion.

**Lu:** On a positive note, after thirty some years, you could still see the city—part of it no doubt was rundown—but you could still see the physical layout of the city. Today it would be largely gone.

**Perry:** Some of my mother's students with whom I stayed good friends for many years became depressed when the city changed so much, because they were suddenly completely disoriented. They had been living there for so long with the city looking basically the same. Maybe a bit shabbier every year, but they could still find their way around. And then, almost overnight, almost everything's gone. That area around Chongqing Nanlu—several of her former students lived there because they taught at the Number Two Medical University. That was the successor to the old St. John's Medical School and a number of my mother's students who had become doctors lived there, but after they put in the new Chongqing Nanlu the neighborhood was completely changed. At

least these days, even though it looks very different from old Shanghai, it has recovered some of the cosmopolitan spirit and vibrance of the 1930s and 1940s.

**Lu:** Despite the often gloomy and sometimes wishful predictions of the downfall of the Communist regime after the death of Mao (particularly, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident), China has arguably done extraordinary well after 1978. You have attributed the resilience of the Beijing regime to its “guerrilla policy style and adaptive governance” and emphasized the continuity in this respect of the Chinese government from Mao to now. Does such adaptive governance lend credence to the notion of China’s exceptionalism (that is, some West-derived international norms are not applicable to China) or explain it?

**Perry:** I would say for the first decade, maybe first two decades, after Mao’s death most social scientists in the West were asking the question of “When will China democratize?” But in the last decade or so, the more common question has been “What explains China’s authoritarian resilience?” The fact that a Communist regime has lasted for thirty-five years after Mao’s death and twenty-five years after the Tiananmen uprising and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe suggests that there’s something unusual about China. Andy Nathan published an article in 2003 about this, suggesting that China’s authoritarian resilience was due to various “informal institutions” that were keeping Chinese communism going.<sup>2</sup> As you know, Sebastian Heilmann and I in our book suggest that some of this resilience comes out of the history of the Chinese Revolution, and the fact that the Chinese Revolution went on so much longer than the Russian

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” in *Journal of Democracy*, volume 14, number 1 (January 2003): 6-17.

Revolution, for example.<sup>3</sup> It required the Chinese Communist Party to develop strategies of flexibility and adaptation to meet varied challenges as it moved from one part of the country to another and engaged with very different places, people, and problems. The resulting system was not perfect by any means, as the Great Leap Forward and other tragedies of the Mao and post-Mao eras show, but there was within the history of the Chinese Communist Party a greater tendency toward experimentation and risk-taking, a greater willingness to change institutions and operations very quickly than is found in most other authoritarian systems. Look at the surviving Communist countries today—China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos—all five came to power through nationalistic rural revolutions. They all followed a very different path to power from the former Soviet Union or most of Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union experienced a short urban revolution that involved workers; in Eastern Europe, Communism was generally imposed by Soviet military might. Yugoslavia was an exception, but swift urban-based takeovers were the general model in European Communism. China is not unique in this respect, but maybe countries that come to power through nationalistic peasant mobilization learn certain valuable lessons about how to relate to their societies. The lessons were somewhat different in each of these cases, because certainly North Korea, Cuba, China, Vietnam, Laos differ in many respects. But they do all seem to have this historical basis for regime durability. So I think it may not be uniquely Chinese, and if that's the case then it does suggest that we should look seriously at the history of revolutions in different societies to see what they learned politically and whether they're managing to continue to apply and adapt those lessons today.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

**Lu:** So if we see the revolution before its victory as a sort of laboratory work, each of these five states you've mentioned had a longer—

**Perry:** —and different kinds of laboratory experiments [from the Soviet Union]. Of course, the PRC has not survived as a regime for as long as the Soviet Union survived. But the Chinese Communist Party has already outlived the Soviet Bolshevik Party. And if you think of the Jiangxi Soviet as being a state—of course it wasn't all of China, but it did rule territory. So since the 1930s, the Chinese Communists have been involved in state governance. It is remarkably long-lived already, whether or not it outlasts the Soviet Union. I can't predict how long it will last. I must say, every time I visit China, I feel less confident about the future of the Chinese Communist state, because everybody I talk to there seems to have so little faith that the current system will last.

**Lu:** If I understand it correctly, your recent research emphasizes the Chinese roots of the Chinese Communist revolution and governance: in your words, the revolution and PRC policy-making are like “cooking a Russian recipe to taste Chinese.” You also pointed out that central to Chinese Communists' mass mobilization was “cultural positioning” and “cultural patronage.” If any revolution has indigenous dynamics, what has made cultural positioning especially Chinese?

**Perry:** I believe that the Chinese Communists used cultural resources in a very intelligent and influential way. I don't mean to argue that Chinese traditional culture inevitably caused a certain kind of outcome in China. I certainly don't believe that. I do believe that cultural governance was a conscious strategy on the part of some very intelligent leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, including Mao, Li Lisan 李立三, Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 and a few other early leaders. I would not include Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 in that group. But I think

many of the early Chinese Communist leaders really understood the power of many different elements of Chinese culture, both folk culture and elite culture. They didn't always get it right: sometimes they didn't do it very well. But usually, they were quite successful in interpreting Soviet Communism in a way that made sense to ordinary Chinese. And so my argument isn't that they fundamentally changed the institutions of socialism. The institutions for the most part are still very similar to those of the Soviet Union. There are some differences, of course, and obviously the PRC no longer has a command economy as before, they now have a much freer market economy, and they've opened up society in a whole variety of ways. But basically, the political institutions remain Soviet-style institutions, even though few people in China talk about them that way. Ordinary people in China will say, "The Communists are so corrupt, they're just like Cixi Taihou [慈禧太后 Empress Dowager Cixi] or they're just like the Guomindang [国民党 the Nationalist Party]", but not "they're just like Gorbachev (or Brezhnev, or Khrushchev)." To me, that's an indication of the cleverness of the Chinese Revolution: the Communist Party, the propaganda department especially, and the Ministry of Culture and so on, have worked hard and have been remarkably successful in making what is actually a non-Chinese political system feel like it's "essentially" Chinese. From the very beginning of the revolution, the leaders used cultural mobilization to get ordinary people to join the revolution, to understand what the goals of the revolution were in ways that made sense in terms of Chinese values and practices.

So I don't mean to suggest that the CCP Sinicized Communism by replacing Soviet institutions and ideology with Chinese institutions and ideas, or that somehow Chinese culture was so powerful that it simply overwhelmed the revolution, but rather

that rather it was a conscious strategy on the part of party leaders to use cultural resources so as to make an alien political system feel familiar. It's quite different from what the Guomindang did. The Guomindang also tried to use Chinese culture for its political benefit. Chiang Kai-shek often invoked Confucianism. But the Guomindang did this in a much more cerebral way. They talked about Confucian ethics and morality, but they didn't fully appreciate the emotional resonance of a wide range of cultural resources.

What was unusual about Mao and Li Lisan and some of the other early CCP leaders—maybe because they came from rural China and the interior of China, Hunan, and they had a better appreciation of this than someone from Zhejiang; I don't know what the real origins of it are—is that somehow they grasped a more powerful and persuasive way of expressing foreign ideas. Chiang Kai-shek was also trying to communicate Soviet ideas in a Chinese context, but his version didn't really work for many people because it failed to appeal to their passions. I believe there needs to be more research on the psychological and emotional dimensions of Chinese Communist organizing strategies. Maybe Mao didn't sit back and say “Ah, I'm behaving like a psychologist or a psychiatrist;” it was probably unconscious on his part. But on the part of the Propaganda Department, it was a very deliberate strategy to try to make foreign institutions, foreign holidays, and foreign ways of behaving seem natural and as though they were a part of Chinese culture. The CCP didn't always do that; there were certainly periods, such as the Cultural Revolution, where there sharp criticism of Chinese culture. I'm not saying that this was a continuous policy. But when the leadership of the Communist Party really wanted to get people to do things, it understood that it needed to mobilize them through emotional appeals that drew on powerful symbolic resources. Even Mao during the



Cultural Revolution, when complaining about Chinese culture, nevertheless used all these folksy metaphors in a way that made sense to ordinary people. I would argue that was an extraordinary achievement.

From what I understand of the Soviet Union, although there was a similar effort at cultural governance, it never quite worked, and there were several reasons for that. One was that Russians were only one of several large ethnicities in the Soviet Union so they couldn't very well do things that would be seen as "essentially" Russian. People in Ukraine or elsewhere would feel alienated. In China, I imagine many people in Xinjiang and Tibet find Chinese cultural governance – with its appeal to 5,000 years of glorious Chinese civilization – unconvincing. But they're a much smaller percentage of the population and geographically peripheral to China proper. So there are these important demographic and historical differences, but I also think that Mao was simply more skilled at cultural mobilization than his counterparts in the Soviet Union.

**Lu:** Your research has covered a large geographic spectrum, from rural north China to the largest city, Shanghai, and also something in between, such as Anyuan. Could you comment on your research from the perspective of China's rural-urban divide and the enduring problems associated with that division?

**Perry:** One thing that really interests me is the human connections between city and countryside. So in studying peasants in Huaibei, I saw that although they originated in the countryside, once they got mobilized into large groups of "Nian" rebels, they started marching on cities. Similarly, in studying Shanghai workers I realized that almost all of them had come recently from the countryside. Exploring their (native-place) organizations in Shanghai and the ties that continued to connect them to the countryside

was very interesting to me. The same with Anyuan miners: on the one hand, they're the proletariat working in this modern industrial coal mine, but on the other hand they came from villages in Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi. And they went back home often. I found these connections particularly interesting in Anyuan because many of those who had been radicalized when they were miners at Anyuan returned to the countryside and established the *nongmin xiehui* [peasant associations] there. Most of the leaders of those peasant associations in Hunan that Mao wrote so enthusiastically about had been radicalized as coal miners at Anyuan.

This interest in urban-rural connectivity was partly inspired by Eric Wolf's writings. Wolf was a Marxist anthropologist who taught at the University of Michigan shortly before I began to study there. One of his books was about the origins of peasant wars in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In that book he points out the importance of connections between city and countryside. Often the most revolutionary peasants were middle peasants, but by middle peasant he doesn't mean what Mao meant by middle peasant. Wolf was referring to families who were part urban and part rural. They might send some of their children to work in the city, but keep other children at home in the countryside, and so from the children in the city they would learn ideas of what was happening in the urban areas, but they would still have the land relations of rural farmers. Wolf believed that people who were straddling the two worlds of city and countryside were more prone to revolution.

I don't find exactly the same thing in China, but I do think the connections between the urban and rural worlds are really important and interesting. China under

---

<sup>4</sup> Eric R. Wolf (1923–1999) was a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at H. Lehman College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York.

Mao was such a strange place because of the *hukou* system.<sup>5</sup> That's so different from most of Chinese history when people could readily move around. I've found Bill Skinner's work inspirational because Skinner was interested in the phenomenon of sojourning, when people left their native places for work elsewhere. I think those networks of mobility are really revealing, and important for anyone interested in studying the lower classes or grassroots society in China.

**Lu:** You have made some major strategic changes at the Harvard-Yenching Institute since you assumed the directorship in 2008. Could you say a few words about the changes you have brought to the institute and your vision of its current and future programming?

**Perry:** I have tried to make some improvements, but I inherited a really wonderful institute, I must say. The Harvard-Yenching Institute, ever since it was founded in 1928, has had a distinguished and influential history. All of the previous six directors introduced a number of important initiatives. So my own efforts have tried to build on the firm foundation that was already in place. There are three areas that I have emphasized. One is to make better use of Harvard's resources for the Harvard-Yenching Institute since we have the extraordinary comparative advantage of being located right here in the great university. A second is to take better advantage of our Asian partners' interests and resources. The Harvard-Yenching Institute has more than fifty partner universities in Asia, and we are trying to do more collaborative programs with those partners. The third is to do more to introduce important, cutting-edge scholarship by Asian scholars to a Western academic audience.

---

<sup>5</sup> Hukou is the household registration system officially promulgated by the PRC government in 1958, with the primary goal to control the movement of people between urban and rural areas.

In terms of taking better advantage of Harvard for example, we try to ensure that all of the visiting scholars and visiting fellows interact closely with the Harvard faculty and students. The visiting scholars program was in place long before I became director, in fact since the 1950s when Professor Edwin O. Reischauer was the director. But often the visiting scholars had limited English and interacted primarily with other scholars from their own country, and not that much with the Harvard community. So we now arrange for all visiting scholars and fellows at least one Harvard or other local faculty mentor who agrees to work with them. We also organize dissertation workshops for the graduate students from Asia led by advanced Harvard graduate students. Harvard students also provide research and language assistance to the visiting scholars. We require each visiting scholar to give a public talk in English at which we ask the Harvard mentor to serve as discussant.

The public talk requirement is intended to encourage adequate English for the scholars we select and, more importantly, it is an opportunity for the Harvard community to learn from visiting scholars' research and to foster closer intellectual connections and friendships. We also support Harvard faculty who are organizing major conferences on Asia here in Cambridge by covering the travel expenses of scholars from Asia to participate in the conferences. This is designed to encourage greater academic communication between Harvard and Asia.

With our partner institutions in Asia, we've introduced a new series of training programs to assist in strengthening underdeveloped fields in the humanities and social sciences. These programs have covered topics ranging from world literature to urban studies. The topics are recommended by our partner universities or research institutes in

Asia. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences did one of the first of these, followed by Fudan, Huadong Shida [East China Normal University], Nanjing University, Hong Kong University and Peking University. They are generally two year programs. But not just in China; Korea University, National Vietnam University, and others have also launched collaborative training programs. The Harvard-Yenching Institute covers the expenses of faculty from Harvard and other international universities to lecture at these training programs. You may have done so yourself—didn't you lecture in one of them?

**Lu:** Yes, I did one at Huadong Shida.

**Perry:** And then at the conclusion of the training programs we invite a few of the most outstanding trainees to come to Harvard-Yenching as a Visiting Scholar or Visiting Fellow. This allows us to recruit promising young scholars from outside of our partner universities, while at the same time encouraging the development of fields that our partners tell us would benefit from our cooperation. So the training programs are a new way of trying to do more in collaboration with our fifty partners in Asia.

In trying to make scholarship from Asia more visible in the West, the institute has partnered with AAS to bring keynote speakers from Asia to the Association for Asian Studies meetings, and we cover travel expenses for HYI scholars and alumni who wish to attend the annual meetings. We've also set up a book review series on our HYI website to introduce important new scholarship published in Asian languages. We've also provided some support to HYI alumni for English translations of their work.

**Lu:** You have many contacts in China, have traveled extensively there, and hold at least eight honorary professorships at Chinese universities. One report says that in the past

thirty years or so you have spent almost a third of your time in China. Could you comment on major changes in Chinese academia as you have seen them over these years?

**Perry:** There have been major changes in Chinese academia. When I spent that year in Nanda [Nanjing University] in 1979-80, it was just after the *gaokao* 高考 [college entrance examinations] had been reintroduced. The first cohorts of students who had taken the *gaokao* had entered Nanda, but there were still the old *gong-nong-bin* 工农兵 [worker-peasant-soldier] students and there was quite a bit of tension and conflict between the older worker-peasant students and the new exam students. It was quite instructive to witness this transition from a Maoist to a meritocratic, but elitist, student body. Since then, so much has changed. Today there's an extraordinary level of government investment in Chinese universities, and massive expansion. The huge enrollments and the sparkling new *daxuecheng* [college towns] developing all over the place with incredible state-of-the-art infrastructure make Harvard's old campus look very *po po lan lan* 破破烂烂 [shabby] by comparison.

**Lu:** Harvard has a classic feeling.

**Perry:** It does have a classic feeling, but the historic Cambridge campus appears increasingly old fashioned compared to the new Chinese universities. On the whole, much of what has occurred at Chinese universities is certainly very positive, but Chinese universities also contribute to the tyranny of the ridiculous university ranking systems — it's not just China's problem, it's a problem for all of us. There is so much hype about developing *shijie yiliu daxue* 世界一流大学 [world-class universities] when we don't really know what a *shijie yiliu daxue* is, so we accept what the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* tell us are the appropriate criteria for being Number 1, and

everybody invests money in those metrics. While it's been extremely exciting to see Chinese universities develop and improve in many ways, I also feel worried about the future. And as I said, this ranking mania isn't just China's problem, it's also Harvard's. Harvard, too, is madly hiring engineers because engineering counts heavily in these rankings, and the new campus that Harvard is building in Allston is basically a campus for Applied Engineering, Harvard's newest school, which was founded just a few years ago. And so everybody is trying to play to the rankings. But in China this effort seems particularly problematic because many of these mega-universities have weak foundations in many academic fields.

**Lu:** Some of them are very new.

**Perry:** And yet they are frantically trying to meet these criteria, hiring large numbers of postdocs who don't do any teaching but just churn out articles so that their employers can count more and more articles published in the right journals in order to improve their rankings. Chinese universities often pay people to teach courses in English even if their English is poor, because for *quanqiuhua* 全球化 [globalization] – another key element in the ranking criteria – universities have to offer classes in English. As China struggles to make its universities “world class” we are seeing some ridiculous side effects.

I really wish there were more thought in China and elsewhere, including the United States, about what the special advantages and the distinct differences of various universities could and should be. Rather than having all Chinese universities, or all leading Chinese universities, trying to do essentially the same thing, it would be far better if Nanda tried to do one thing and Beida [Peking University] tried to do something really different and Qinghua something yet totally different. But Qinghua, whose strength is

engineering, is now frantically trying to build up its humanities. And because Qinghua established a Schwartzman College, Beida is setting up a Yenching Academy. Everybody is trying to copy and compete with each other instead of trying to imagine some truly alternative kind of education. That concerns me.

But on the whole, of course, Chinese universities are much more open than was once the case, and it's much more possible for Chinese scholars—at least privately, but not always publicly—to say many more things than used to be the case. All the important scholars in China have traveled all over the world, many of them have degrees from all over the world, and they also have students from all over the world, so it's considerably more cosmopolitan than it was when I first experienced Chinese university life back in 1979.

Not long ago, Professor He Weifang from the Beida Law School was here giving a talk, and he remarked that Beida could never become *di yiliu daxue* 第一流大学 [a first-rate university], as long as there's a *dangzu* 党组 [party organization] in control. On one level I would agree with him, but on another level, if we say a *shijie yiliu daxue* 世界一流大学 [a world-class university] is defined simply as a place that ranks high in the Times Higher Education of Jiaotong Daxue's [Jiaotong University] rankings, then having a *dangzu* is very helpful, because it can serve as an effective intermediary between the university and state resources that are channeled directly into the ranking metrics. The Chinese government is pumping so much money into its universities, and at the same time, the American government is withdrawing federal funding from U.S. universities. Having a Party Committee and a Party Secretary who's a *fubuzhang* 副部长 [vice minister], or whatever his rank is, can be very helpful in the global ranking competition.



This is a quantitative exercise where we're not really talking about quality but about measurable inputs and outputs. The legacy of the command economy means that Communist parties are good at figuring out how to meet quantitative targets. Higher education all around the world is in a crisis situation as many of us have become obsessed with quantitative rankings to the detriment of quality. What our students learn or what our students do with their lives after they leave university—those are the things we should be paying attention to. Not how many articles you publish and how many are in English, and how many are in SSCI journals. What if the publications are junk? There has been a reorientation of the value of higher education all around the world, and the fact that many Chinese families with disposable income are very concerned about the rankings and want to send their children to the schools with the highest rankings also influences American education. Harvard like other universities wants to attract tuition dollars from China. Chinese higher education is part of a global phenomenon that in some ways is really encouraging but in other ways is deeply disturbing. I don't blame China for this, I blame all of us. Harvard's view is, "We want to stay Number 1, so we'll play this game too!" instead of saying "Why should we invest in engineers? We have MIT right down the street; why not let them be the best engineering school in the world? We can be the best liberal arts university in the world."

**Lu:** A related question: you studied Chinese in Taiwan in the 1970s and have frequently visited the island ever since. Could you comment on Chinese studies in Taiwan and scholarly exchanges across the strait?

**Perry:** I first went to Taiwan in 1969 to study Chinese and then I went there often in the 1970s for further language work and dissertation research. After I started to go to China

beginning in the late 1970s, I went less frequently to Taiwan. These days I would say I go to China three or four times a year, and to Taiwan once every few years. I don't go to Taiwan as much as I used to – or as much as I'd like to. Taiwan is a wonderful place, and I always am happy to go back there because people in Taiwan are incredibly nice.

**Lu:** You see sort of different types of Chinese, one is affected by the revolution, and the other is not.

**Perry:** That may be true, although I found people in Fujian to be unusually friendly too. Maybe that's a reflection of Minnan culture. When I lived in Taiwan in the late '60s and 70's, I particularly liked travelling outside of Taipei and getting away from the dominance of *waishengren* 外省人 [mainlanders]. I felt that *benshengren* 本省人 [Taiwan locals], who are part of Minnan culture, were more friendly and warm.

**Lu:** I live in Georgia—it is known for having “Southern hospitality.” There's probably something of that nature among the Taiwan locals.

**Perry:** I was back in Taiwan this past fall for a couple of weeks, mostly at Academia Sinica giving talks and connecting with the political scientists there. In the past I've had closer contact with historians, but this time it was more with political scientists working on contemporary China. I was quite impressed with the research that many of them had done. Unfortunately, it's not very well known in the United States. And even though almost all the people that I was talking to there have American PhDs and occasionally write in English, their most interesting work is in Chinese. I was reading the books published recently by a number of them. What really impressed me was how seriously they took issues of leadership. These days in American political science it's out of fashion to talk about leaders; everybody talks about institutions, not about actual people.

The Taiwan political scientists were much more attentive to the individual characteristics of leaders and also to what kinds of things made for good leadership in a Chinese political context. I found that to be a very valuable perspective, one that deserves wider attention.

### **Selected Publications by Elizabeth J. Perry**

*Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (1980)

*Chinese Perspectives on the Nien Rebellion* (1981)

*The Political Economy of Reform in Post-Mao China* (1985)

*Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (1992)

*Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (1993)

*Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Chinese Cities* (1995)

*Putting Class in Its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (1996)

*Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (1997)

*Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (1997)

*Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance* (2000)

*Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (2001)

*Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (2002)

*Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China* (2002)

*Patrolling the Revolution: Worker Militias, Citizenship and the Modern Chinese State*  
(2006)

*Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (2007)

“Chinese Conceptions of Rights” *Perspectives on Politics* 6, 1:37-50 (2008)

*Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (2011)

*Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (2012)

*Growing Pains in a Rising China* (2014)

“The Populist Dream of Chinese Democracy,” *Journal of Asian Studies* (forthcoming)